Film noir is, arguably, one of the most influential genres in film history—and my personal favorite, I must admit. Developing from the crime/gangster films of the 30’s, noir reflects the post-war anxieties and paranoia of the 40’s and 50’s. It is one of the most stylized of genres, with distinctive lighting, setting, characters and situations. Classic noir films include Laura, Double Indemnity, Out of the Past, DOA and the genre even inspired a modern upgrade somewhat unimaginatively called “Neo-noir”—ironic when discussing The Matrix! Below, you’ll find some of the more common noir characteristics.

The Noir Hero

The Noir hero is not your typical hero. But then, he lives in a corrupt world, so what’s a guy to do? Noir heroes are often lonely and alienated. They are morally compromised and battered, always jaded and cynical. Noir men are often “hard-boiled detectives” or victims of fate (or seductive women), an average joe fighting a doomed battle against the forces of corruption. He may often be a disillusioned idealist, trying to do the right thing, but surrounded on all sides by a malignant fate.

A noir hero’s ethics are situational, practical, and often just over the legal line. He’s dirty, paranoid, and denies the fact that he’s a hero. In fact, he inhabits the seamy side of life—consorts with criminals and low-lifes from the underworld.

Noir antagonists are often corrupt police officials, gangsters, or ostensible “pillars of society” who are themselves corrupted by riches.

Dangerous Dames

Women do not come off well in noir. They are either vapid portraits of the loyal female, protecting her man, or (far more often) the dreaded “femme fatale” or double-crossing dame. They use their sexual wiles to snare and entrap the hero, leading him into criminal escapades and setting him up to take the rap. They are mysterious, ambitious and duplicitous, willing to betray anyone who trusts them, and destroy whoever gets in their way.

Alluring and seductive, the femme fatale has no compunction about using sex to get her way...and the hapless noir hero finds her irresistible, even to the point of committing murder at her behest. She enslaves and hypnotizes the hero, often through jealousy and obsession.

This Is The City: Noir Settings

The setting in noir films—almost always the city—almost becomes a character in itself. But this is no bustling, bright metropolis. The noir city oozes with corruption. It festers. Wrapped in fog, its streets wet with rain, the city seduces its denizens with empty promises of wealth and the good life.

It lures the characters into its dark alleyways, seedy bars, diners and nightclubs. Cheap bed-sits and trashy hotels proliferate, cast into shadows by the prevalence of flashing neon. Streets are deserted, buildings loom menacingly, the environment seethes and broods, threatening violence around every corner.

The noir world is an unstable, malign force that never plays by the rules.
Noir Elements

Cinematography: Noir film is most characterized by its distinctive use of lighting. Pools of light and shadow pervade the images. Venetian blinds often cast stripes like prison bars across characters’ faces. Extreme, even skewed camera angles suggest a world gone wrong. Tight framing traps the characters against doors, walls, other characters. The feeling is often claustrophobic, stultifying. There are few open spaces, few horizontal lines: space is fractured, vertical, askew.

Iconography: Mirrors and reflections abound in the noir world, implying its dual nature and false appearances. Clocks, guns, staircases and windows create images of doom or entrapment. Place is character in noir and the decrepit diners, cramped apartments and decaying factories all show the shabby nature of the characters.

Narrative: Forget the straight-forward, chronological story line! Noir is all about flashbacks, fractured time and crooked plot lines. The past invades the present, foretelling doom. The stories are convoluted, and, like the characters, we seldom know the whole story. Frequent voice-over narration limits the perspective. In noir, no one is all-knowing, or all-seeing, not even the camera. (Quite famously, the director and screenwriter were so confused about who actually committed the murder in *The Big Sleep*, they called the author to ask him. He didn’t know, either.)

The stories almost always deal with crime, and chronicle the fall of the hero from a state of innocence to corruption. Even if he manages to prevail in the end (and he often dies), there is no sense of the world being a better place. He ends up betrayed and disillusioned, alone in a corrupt and ambiguous world.

![Noir Elements Image](image)

Noir in a Nutshell:

**The Hero**: “I think I’m in a frame, and I can’t get out of it.” *Out of the Past*

**Femme Fatale**: “She can’t be all bad. No one is.” “She comes closest.” *Out of the Past*

**Noir Attitude**: “First is first. Second is nobody.” *The Big Combo*

**Noir Philosophy**: “Someday fate or some mysterious force can put the finger on you or me for no reason at all.” *Detour*

**Noir Epitaph**: “Everybody’s in trouble.” *His Kind of Woman*

Sources:
